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THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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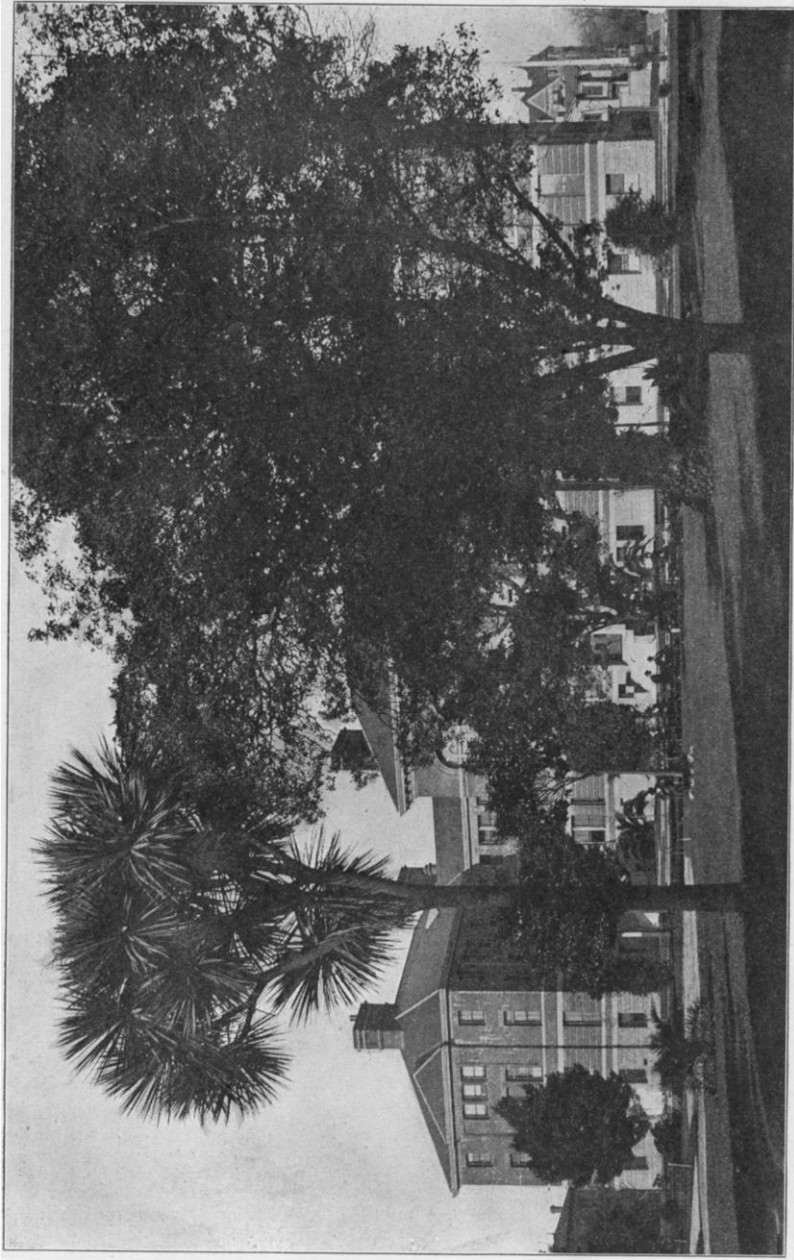
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A SUGGESTION AS TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

BEYOND preparing his students in the several books required for college entrance in English, the secondary-school teacher finds himself called upon to do a certain amount of preparation in composition or in rhetoric, or in both, as the case may be, which is a very great source of trial and confusion to him. Often his instructions are dangerously vague; almost always the college fails to state clearly just exactly what it expects; and his ideas of the thing he wishes to accomplish are, naturally enough, though very unfortunately, also indistinct and formless. The result on the pupil is just what is to be expected from such looseness of method on the part of both college and school; he comes to his freshman work with helter-skelter smattering notions of description and argumentation and unity and book reviews, but without any fixed belief in a thing called *writing*, which is bigger and better than even these great things. When asked the question, "What is the hardest part of writing for you, and what the easiest?" nine out of ten freshmen will reply: "Description is the hardest part of writing for me," or "narration," or what not, and "argumentation the easiest." Description is a "part" of writing to them, or more probably writing is a "part" of description. At any rate, most of them have not the slightest feeling for good writing in general. They are not natural or accurate, nor do they express any clear, well-thought-out point; and they resent being called upon to take account of such



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things. They do not describe, or apparently see, things that are actually before them in space, and this is the complaint of the teacher of biology and chemistry as well as of English. They imagine what might be there or ought to be there, or what the instructor would wish to have them see. It is impossible for most of them to express themselves in a straightforward, direct, clear manner, or carry out any line of thought intelligently, consistently, and thoroughly. More than this, the language used is ordinarily trite, colorless, most hopelessly impersonal.

Perhaps the teachers of secondary-school English will consider this statement somewhat severe; but the writer has tried to be fair and accurate so far as her own experience goes, and she is inclined to think that the evidence of most college English teachers would be much the same for the rank and file of their classes. It is only just, of course, to take account of, and give credit to, those schools that are waking to the necessity of giving better instruction in writing, and are experimenting, some of them with splendid success, all of them with untiring zeal, to make the work more interesting and sensible. It is pleasant to add that the number of such schools is increasing from year to year, with increasingly good results in the college class-room. Here their influence is felt tremendously; for even one properly trained, open-minded student among twenty is enough sometimes to work wonders, to change a listless, self-satisfied class to one of surprisingly wholesome and right-minded acuteness.

It is from a desire to set to work with those who are thinking and experimenting that this paper is undertaken, and its main suggestion is that unification and simplification are sorely needed in the teaching of writing in secondary schools. It would urge that teacher and student understand thoroughly and keep clearly before them always the oneness of the thing they are working for—good writing, simple, honest, clear expression of thought. Now, this can be brought about only by clearing the ground of the many things that at present incumber it and obstruct the view, and by giving to both teacher and student a sense of rest and calm in the conviction that it is right to do so. One long step in this direction would be taken, without question,

if everybody concerned could rid his mind, at the outset, of the necessity of holding to the conventional text-book division of writing into "forms of discourse," each with its unwieldy body of rules and theory, and could get to work directly, with the joy that comes from a wider, freer, simpler outlook. Probably nothing breeds more stiffness, more pettiness, in writing than these divisions; nothing more effectually cut off the possibility of naturalness in expression and generosity in thought. With this feeling in mind, it has come to be the purpose of the writer to prove, if possible, by dwelling on the nature of the various forms, that the insistence on such hard-and-fast distinctions is unnecessary; to show that fundamentally the forms of discourse are not separate, isolated, and mutually exclusive, but that, on the contrary, they are all easily reducible to two forms, and that these two, description and exposition, are in reality only one, the change between them coming about simply through a shifting of emphasis, as the writer is interested now in the particular object before him, and now in its relations to other objects.

When looked at superficially, description and exposition seem utterly and hopelessly separated. Compare, for instance, a plain description of a house with an essay on "Tendencies in Modern Journalism," and it will seem an impossible thing to find any points of resemblance between them. But look at them from the point of view of the mind which reads and the mind which writes, and the connection is established without great difficulty. One sees very readily now that the same mental activities on the part of reader and writer are necessary to both—that description, while it calls primarily for the construction of a distinct image, calls at the same time upon the relating and universalizing activities of the mind; and that exposition, while its primary concern is with relating and abstracting, must at the same time individualize—otherwise it has no meaning, no foundation. Psychology confirms us, of course, in our judgment by its dictum that perception is impossible without conception, and that conception is impossible without perception; and further enlightens and comforts us by asserting that the various faculties of knowledge are not different powers of the mind, but simply mark various stages in its development.

To return to the house spoken of a moment ago; we succeeded in getting the desired picture from the description, because as the words reach our ears we construct the house from material that is stored within our minds. We select this, and reject that, detail—make it white instead of yellow or green, colonial in type, of wood, and so on—adding to, and changing, our first image house with the utmost rapidity and skill, until the structure stands complete before us, clear and beautiful, and different from all the others that were called up by association. But we could not have succeeded in getting the picture had it not been for the images within our minds to which to relate, and from which to discriminate and differentiate, this particular one; and the writer could not have emphasized and isolated it but for this helpful presence in his own mind, and from the knowledge that it existed in everybody's else mind as well.

Very often the presence is so near that the writer of description forgets that his emphasis is on the subject before him and becomes interested in its large relations, so that the description turns into exposition. This, of course, is particularly noticeable in poetry and in the poetic mind, in which the universal and particular seem very close together, so that it is impossible to say whether the object in space suggested the thought, or the trend of thought suggested the fastening upon the object. Notice, for instance, this tendency in Wordsworth above all other poets, who even goes so far as to say that it is indispensable to good poetry that it make thought-connections and lead the mind from the contemplation of the individual to that of the universal. It might be interesting here to note the tendency of *all* the processes to merge into one another very much more readily in poetry than in prose. Is it because of the freedom and unconventionality of the poetic mind, its hatred of the little, its more naïve power to grasp wholes?

In exposition the emphasis is removed altogether from the individual and put upon the class, although, without question, the individual is none the less surely involved. Of course it is difficult for the reader to detect the presence of anything but generalization in Bacon, in Carlyle, in Emerson; they are appar-

ently so far removed from the one, have been so long concerned with the many. Yet they hold us; and now and then we come upon a passage that fairly shines with the light that our own experience gives it. We have made the same generalization that our writer has done; our experiences are fresh in our minds, and we feel that he must have had the same experiences to give his statement just this emphasis, just this color. Immediately we begin to see that he is human, and to reach a vague approximation of the amount of looking and listening and recording that he has done. Again, abstractions that are at the present moment meaningless to us, except theoretically, begin to have more meaning as we see more of the world and do more reading and studying—that is, place ourselves in a state somewhat approaching his.

But the thing is more obvious when we actually come to the writing of exposition ourselves. We find on examination that our theories and convictions arise from several sources. Sometimes they are a part of our family tradition; sometimes we unthinkingly adopt those of our friends. Mainly, however, our final definition of things, our firmly rooted ideas, our really strong convictions, undoubtedly come from first-hand investigation of objects and events that present themselves to our notice, and an almost, or quite, unconscious abstracting of the element common to all the experiences. Notice the strength of our deep-rooted childish abstractions; the sudden knowledge that John's returning the purse he had found, in spite of many temptations, is "honesty;" the flash of enlightenment from other people's actions that there is such a thing as "dishonesty;" that "courage" has a real meaning, and "friendship" is a thing that we know about after all. It is simply the observation of a few more instances that gives us our later abstractions, and simply a matter of a great many more instances and more careful observation of them that brings us at last to our large and highly defined generalizations.

Exposition, then, while it appears to concern itself only with the abstract, the universal, the *results* of examination of individuals, really calls for the examination of many things instead of one thing, and simply overlooks or suppresses, while it does

not forget, the individual, in its interest in the unity of the many. Since description emphasizes the individual, however, and apparently calls altogether upon the perceptive activity of the mind, which is its original and least-developed faculty, it might be said to be incomplete or undeveloped exposition, and exposition, complete, or fully related and universalized description; and it is an easy step from this conclusion to the judgment that good description suggests many relations, while it brings out the object with perfect definiteness; and good exposition is full and rich and deep with its wealth of underlying observation.

The relation of argumentation to the other forms of discourse must be easily obvious. Argumentation goes a step farther than exposition, we may say, in that it makes its observations and draws its conclusions for a very definite reason and for a very definite audience. Perhaps it might be nearer the truth to say that argumentation begins with its definite audience and end, and seeks out its proofs or makes its observations always with this end in view, and with the idea of removing all hindrances to the establishment of the end. Notice, for instance, that very real and sincere argument so commonly undertaken to convince a boy or girl that it is a desirable thing to go to college. The difference it has made to this, that, and the other acquaintance is dwelt upon; the kind of benefit selected for argument being, of course, that which will most strongly appeal to the girl or boy to be persuaded. Perhaps it will be social success, or business success; at any rate, in every case the audience and end determine very closely and clearly the plan to be followed, the details to be selected.

Informal and unconscious argument we find everywhere about us, in speech as well as in writing, and here it is linked very closely to the other forms. Description and narration, for instance, tend to pass over easily into argumentation. A very innocent story, casually told, will often succeed in moving one to a certain line of action, or in preventing it. A man describing a house to his friend, with the idea in mind that this is exactly the house his friend ought to buy, is, of course, absolutely guided in his selection of details by this dominating idea, with the result

that his letter will often very naturally end with the plea, "Come down and look at it;" or that his friend is moved to look at the house, even though the wish is unexpressed and the argument unconscious.

Of formal argument it is perhaps unnecessary to speak much, because its limitations are more or less artificial, the question under discussion being rarely, of course, of vital importance to the audience, and the end rarely anything more than the securing of the audience's sympathy and judgment to one or the other side. But there is an attempt always to get the same close relation between the speaker and the audience, with here the added difficulty that the audience is not well known, and that both sides must be prepared to meet all sorts of unspoken objections, and much silent opposition in a very limited space of time; and must run the risk, consequently, of occasionally knocking down men of straw, or of undervaluing and underemphasizing real difficulties and doubts in the minds of the listeners. But, to bring argumentation again into line with what has been said of the other forms, it of course involves both the individual and the universal very noticeably. It might be roughly described as a kind of limited and circumscribed exposition, which makes up for this limitation in a vividness and directness that are necessarily denied to exposition.

Narration has been left to the last of the paper, since what has gone before is necessary to its understanding, because it is a larger task than the others, and possibly also because instinct always leads one to reserve the choicest morsel for the end of the feast. Narration could almost be considered, for convenience, as of two kinds, were it not for the expressed purpose of the paper to avoid divisions of all sorts. It might be said, at any rate, to be as much of two kinds as are description and exposition; indeed, the relation of the two kinds, or, better, the two extremes of narration, is exactly the same as is the relation between description and exposition. At one end is pure or simple narration, and at the other almost pure exposition, in which the story element is quite lost sight of, and the interest of the writer and reader is altogether centered on the idea

expressed — religious, social, psychological, what not. Notice Henry James for a marked example of this extreme expository narrative form. Narration, however, it seems to me, is curiously averse to such extremes as those shown in description and narration. Its pure form is more intimately dependent on the expository, and its expository form keeps the present vividly before us at all times, as we shall see later. As pure a form as there is, however, simple narration, by which is meant stories without plot, tales of adventure, history, is very easily classed with description. Even superficially looked at, they show great similarity, and one is often puzzled to know which is which, or pleased to find narration where one is expecting description, or *vice versa*. Notice, for an instance of the mixture of the two, the opening lines of "Pippa Passes":

But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the world.

As has been said before, in substance, narration deals with particular events almost as description deals with particular objects. It calls upon the individualizing, discriminating activity of the mind. Its interest and emphasis are almost wholly on the present and particular, while it calls for aid, as does description, on the universal and general. Pater's dictum as to the inevitableness of generalizing in writing of all kinds, however, is so happily appropriate just here that I cannot refrain from quoting it:

Your historian, with absolutely truthful intention, amid the multitude of facts presented to him, must needs select, and in selecting assert something of his own humor, something that comes not of the world without, but of a vision within. So Gibbon molds his unwieldy material to a preconceived view. Livy, Tacitus, Michelet, moving full of poignant sensibility amid the records of the past, each after his own sense modifies — who can tell where and to what degree? and becomes something else than a transcriber; each, as he thus modifies, passes into the domain of art proper.¹

The humblest student of history finds that his interest is not in the event itself, but in his own or somebody's else precon-

¹ WALTER PATER, *Essay on Style*, "Appreciations."

ceived view of it; that his whole joy in reading and research consists in relating events to event, age to age, so as to give meaning and color to the otherwise stupid, bewildering mass. As for the setting down or telling of actual events without prejudice, we all know the apparent impossibility of the task. Two persons with the sincerest desire to speak the truth will present widely different accounts of the self-same event, as has been discovered in many a wearisome murder trial. With objects before us in space, we can, a great many of us, reach approximately the same description. With events before us in space—that is, with objects or people held before us a little longer time, and in motion instead of at ease—each of a hundred of us will present a different description. Is it because the greater complexity of this experience causes reference to an immeasurably vaster number of related experiences than does the description? It would seem at first glance that entirely fictitious tales of adventure are absolutely simple or pure narration—*Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, in which the interest seems to be wholly on the narrative, on the sequence of events. Yet here, again, is there much question that we have ultimately the vague end in view of dispensing compensation right and left—of getting the villain properly punished, the hero fittingly rewarded, and the wretched sufferer and outcast finally restored to his own?

In narration with plot—novels, the drama—the emphasis is rather heavily on the “moral” at the end, if you wish, though we have passed beyond the stage where we wish the moral stated in so many words. Call it point, or purpose, or the author’s message to the world, or what not; at any rate, it is what in the end we are interested in, what he is interested in, his reason and justification, his gratification and satisfaction in writing it. The beauty and excellence of this fact are recognized, of course, by authors of text-books on rhetoric, who say to prospective writers: “A story must have a purpose, a central thought, must teach something;” and by the public in general; for it goes without saying that we all insist on having a man *say* something, lead somewhere, in his story. And notice the actual practice of the

writers themselves. It is a difficult matter to say, in so many words, what George Eliot *means* by *Silas Marner*; but we certainly feel that there is in it a message, an informing principle, or part of a large truth that all her books together give us. If this is true of George Eliot, how much more indisputably so is it with some of the recent writers—with Kipling, Zangwill, George Meredith, with Tolstoi and Ibsen!

Narrative literature is surely expository in tendency, though, as was said before, it cannot be so extreme as exposition; it cannot shut out or suppress particulars. On the contrary, it prefers to limit its range, to pick out and emphasize a few absorbing ones, barely hinting at all the evidence in its possession; with the result that it runs the risk of seeming prejudiced or of prejudicing its readers unfairly. And although it goes in a most complicated and devious way to the establishment of its point, nevertheless it meets with tremendous success in the end. It gives results very rarely. It presents to the reader the experiments, with a few objects, one might say, that have been made by the writer; gives him the material at first hand—this speech here, that action there; this series of events, or this relation of cause and effect connecting them; and the reader enters into the working out of the message as he could never enter into the working out of an expository treatment of the same subject, if it is possible to conceive of such a thing. He “lives” the story, we say, and he does actually do this, because the characters speak and act and look as they do in real life—that is as nearly as possible as the written page can reproduce real life—and he does the generalizing, under the guidance of the writer, naturally, who selects all the details that he wishes presented and shuts out all others, handling men and seasons in a masterful fashion. So deep is everybody’s absorption and co-operation in the thing being worked out, indeed, that we rarely resent this “guidance” of the writer, which turns out to be the boldest kind of tyranny, and submit ourselves readily to it again, if ever we are rebellious enough to skip a page or two—going back obediently to read it afterward, in the dreadful fear that something is there which we oughtn’t to have missed.

It is said by some writers of text-books on rhetoric that there are two sources of pleasure in the reading of a story—the interest in the purpose, and the interest in the plot. One fails to see how there can be the two here any more than there may be said to be two interests in a statue or a painting,—the thing said, and the way in which it is expressed. Of course, if one has made a long and detailed study of paragraph structure, one instinctively notes the kind of paragraph one is reading. One's attention is rather concentrated on the kind, the class, in the same way that a person who has been working at the subject of plot has an eye to the way things are being managed in a story—sometimes unconsciously even. But to the average normal reader the interest of the plot *is* the interest of the purpose. He undoubtedly receives an impression of the thing as a whole—of *one* thing—with as little attempt at classification and analysis of the plot as the writer made probably while he was in the midst of things. And this unconsciousness on the part of both is as it should be, doubtless.

At this point the question very naturally asks itself: “But how is it possible to make the student see and appreciate the underlying meaning and unity of the various forms of discourse? how get him into the habit of writing for the purpose of saying something worth while to another person, instead of bothering about ‘coherence’ say, in a piece of imaginary description?” First of all, the teacher can have always in his mind the sense of oneness of writing; and this alone will inevitably do a great deal for the student. A certain security, a certain calmness and generosity of mind, in both will result from the teacher's giving a proper emphasis and just evaluation to things in his choice of subjects, criticism of themes, and guiding of the class-room work. Secondly, it would seem to be wise for the student to work out for himself and understand thoroughly the nature of these several writing forms and their relation to one another. It is a simple matter to get him to see that the tree presented to the mental vision is a tree only by virtue of our experience, and that the abstract idea is simply abstracted from numerous living, concrete things about us. He accepts easily the idea that all narration

tends to be expository in character, and that simple narration is unlike description simply in that it deals with events instead of objects. Thirdly, to emphasize the fact of the interrelation, or to lead up to it naturally, it would seem to be well to make a study of one piece of writing that involves all of the forms of discourse—a good novel or a drama—instead of making use of a dozen “pieces” or fragments. There is no reason why *Ivanhoe*, or *Silas Marner*, or *Mill on the Floss*, or even *Macbeth*, should not serve as the basis of a whole term’s or a whole year’s work in writing. Hundreds of plans for treatment quickly suggest themselves to resourceful teachers, hundreds of agreeable subjects for themes and for class discussion. For instance: “Make an exact statement of the point or meaning of the book;” “If this message seems to you strikingly true, even without the evidence that the book gives you, trace out, if possible, the experience and circumstances that have led you to form the generalization;” “Express the same idea in the way which seems most natural to you, to the person you would be likely to talk to on the subject;” “Rewrite the story, if it is unsatisfactory to you, or remodel any part of it, by changing the nature and circumstances of the hero;” “How would your sister (or friend) act if she were placed in Maggie Tulliver’s position?” “Describe Maggie in your friend’s position;” “Prove, to somebody who strongly dislikes him, that *Macbeth* is an essentially noble character”—and so on. There is neither excuse nor time for the enumeration of the various possibilities that spring up in the mind.

The sense of oneness in any subject studied is so soothing and so inevitably conducive to good work that it is a tremendous pity it never comes to the young students of writing. As it is, he starts with differentiation in secondary schools, learns “kinds” of things and confusion, and never comes to a sense of the harmony of the various processes until after he reaches college, if ever he works it out at all. It would seem to be properly the work of the college to evolve the many out of the one—to distinguish and discriminate closely, and concern itself simply with detailed and advanced elective work in description and narration and argumentation. As it is, the college has to begin all over

again. Freshman classes ordinarily busy themselves mostly with doing or undoing secondary-school work, with the result that a startlingly large amount of time is lost to the student. But, setting aside altogether the question of the student's ultimate gain in the study of writing, there is the further, and perhaps just as important, one of his present interest. This appears to be somewhat difficult to elicit in many cases. Writing is likely to be the off-subject, even if the rest of the English work is agreeable, though the students are usually willing enough to be pleased. "I am constantly impressed by the pathetic readiness of boys and girls to be interested," writes one discouraged English teacher who has just been complaining of the difficulty of interesting her students, and of her helplessness in the midst of things set for her to do. This seems a pitiful state of affairs, considering that the subject of writing is really one of fascinating interest and ought to be taught, one would think, without a great deal of pain on either side.

Of course, the suggestion given above does not presume to offer itself, in any sense of the word, as a solution of all the difficulties that beset teacher and student in English work. Indeed, it will be found to be of no value whatever unless there is besides, on the part of the teacher, an intelligent comprehension of the possibilities of the principle and an ability to develop and use it skilfully both in writing and criticism. With these, however, the writer feels that a great deal may be accomplished simply in the matter of making the work interesting—a sense of the reasonableness and simplicity of the thing, in the first place, which puts it within the reach of everybody; and of its dignity and largeness, in the second place, which ought to make it seem worth while to even the least interested, and certainly offers sufficient scope for the eagerness and enthusiasm which, it is hoped, would be aroused in the better students by just the sense of unaccustomed freedom that, above all other things, it must give.

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